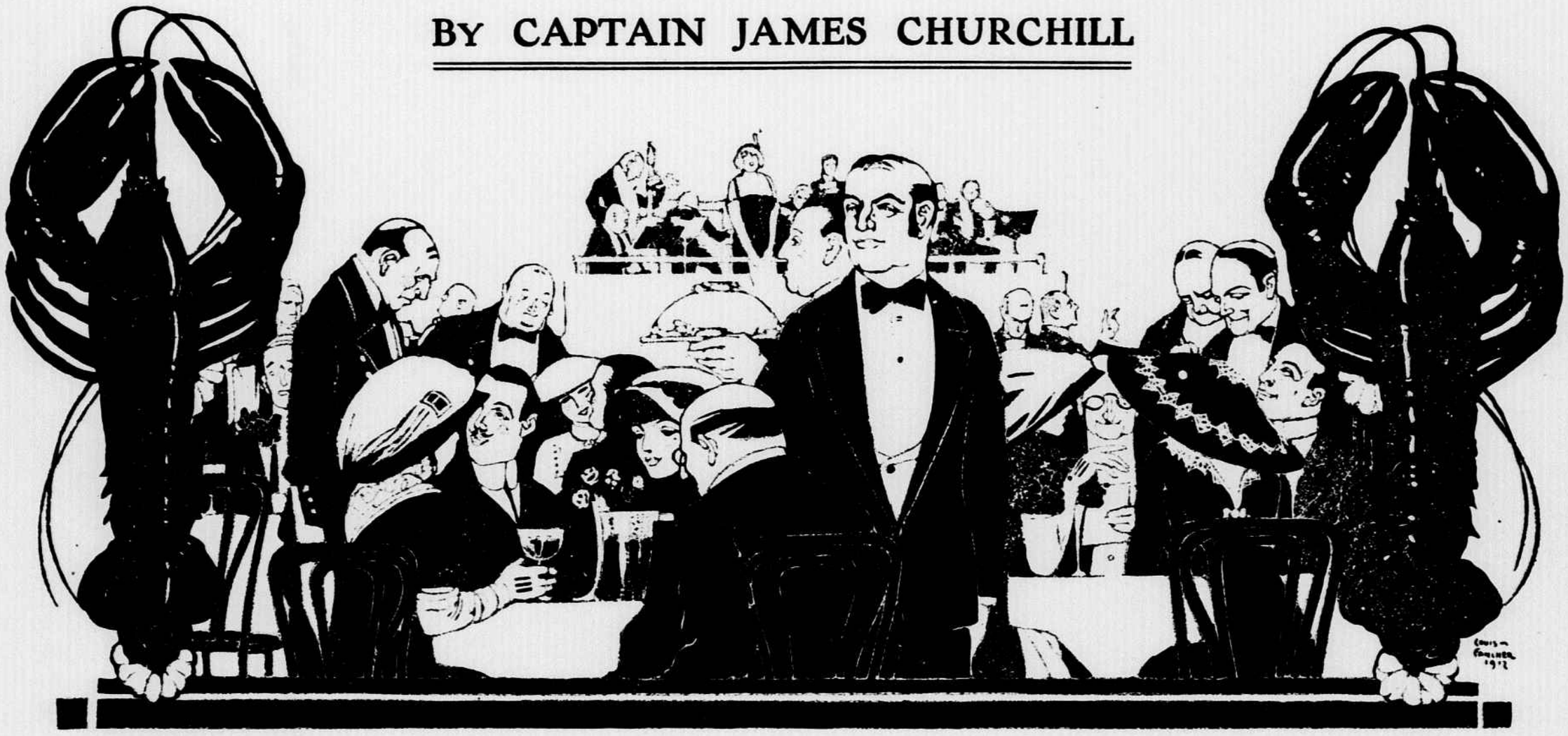
THE REAL LOBSTER PALACE

BY CAPTAIN JAMES CHURCHILL



THE man who invented the phrase "lobster palace" must be the same fellow who once called Cranford, New Jersey, the "Venice of America." The fact that you can buy seafood in a well lighted and decently decorated Broadway restaurant undoubtedly struck him as being just as remarkable, sensational, and novel as the fact that in the little Jersey town in question a river flows down what would otherwise have been Main-st. As a matter of record, what is popularly known throughout the land as a "lobster palace" isn't any more a lobster palace than Cranford is Venice. As I see it,—and I have been directly connected with two of the leading "lobster palaces" in New York for the last nine years, one of them the largest in the metropolis,—lobsters on the bill of fare, a big chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and a large urn of flowers in the middle of a room don't make a "lobster palace," any more than a muddy little stream, a couple of rowboats, and two hundred overenthusiastic inhabitants make a Venice.

Every time I pick up a magazine or a newspaper detailing at imposing length descriptions of the "gay life" and "maelstrom of Broadway society" that prevail in what the writers call the "lobster palaces of New York," I feel like the little newsboy who went to see Sarah Bernhardt act.

When the famous French actress was playing her lengthy repertoire in New York a year ago, one of the dramatic critics thought he'd like to see how the folk up in the gallery were taking the performance. He left his seat on the ground floor during the second act of "Camille," went up to the gallery, and took a seat in the last row. Right in front of him, so the story was told to me, sat a little news kid. The critic noticed that the youngster kept his eyes riveted on the stage, cupped his face in his hands, and sat there immovable, wrapped in the deepest attention. The critic was interested. Thought he, "Here is the proof of Bernhardt's amazing talent! See how she chains even this boy's attention to her work! Talking in French, a language that the boy can't even vaguely understand, and yet she holds him! Wonderful, wonderful!" Thus did the critic ruminate. And, when the curtain fell on the act, the critic bent forward, touched the lad on the shoulder, and said, "A great performance, isn't it, my boy?" To which the kid replied, "Sure, Boss; but which one of them guys is Bernhardt?"

In the same way, after paying deep attention to the articles I read, I always feel like asking the men who wrote and write them which "lobster palace" they are talking about and raving over. I've seen them all, and, as I've said, I've owned or managed a couple of them myself; but I'll be gosh dinged if I can pick one out! In the elegant speech of the renowned Mrs. Harris, "There ain't no such thing."

To begin at the beginning, I have never been able to understand why a lobster was chosen as the chief and rampant figure on the supposed coats of arms of the Broadway restaurants. For one lobster eaten by a patron of one of these misnamed "lobster palaces," we get orders for ten filet mignons, eighteen sets of poached eggs on toast, thirty-nine lamb chops with French peas, and forty-five sandwiches, all good, substantial, nourishing, homelike, and certainly not "gay," dishes. It has been said that they call them "musical comedies" because they contain neither comedy nor music. By this same token, I suppose they call them "lobster palaces" because of the marked absence of lobsters and palatial features.

Obviously, one of these metropolitan restaurants is somewhat more elaborate than a quick lunch or one of the automatic eating places where you drop a nickel in the slot for a cup of coffee and get a piece of apple pie; but I have grave doubts that the dining hall of Windsor Castle or that of the old Versailles regal quarters is not a bit more pretentious. If Peoria, Illinois, or Natchez, Mississippi, is inclined to regard a clean tablecloth and a clean napkin for each diner as the special province and mark of a King, then maybe a "lobster palace" (forgetting the lobster side of it for the time being) *is* a palace. But, otherwise, like the last part of the old ostrich riddle ("What is it that is tall and has feathers and sticks its head in the sand and barks like a dog"), the "palace" is probably added just to make it harder.

According to a seemingly widespread and encompassing belief, a lobster is a very sporty and gay piece of food. It seems to stand for dissipation, spendthrifts, fast life, and all that sort of thing. According to popular morality, lobsters are frightfully immoral in the following order:

(1) Lobster *à la* Newburg in a chafing dish.
(2) Broiled live lobster.
(3) Stuffed deviled lobster.

(4) Lobster en brochette.
(5) Lobster curry.
(6) Lobster salad.
(7) Lobster cocktail.

In the eyes of the corned beef and cabbage section of the populace, to partake of lobster in any of these forms in a public restaurant argues proportionately for moral degradation, the wrecking of banks, the beating of the wife, and the breaking up of the home on the part of the offender. Crabmeat *à la* Newburg in a chafing dish cost just as much as lobster in the same condition of servitude and surroundings; but nobody ever stigmatizes crabmeat. And a chicken sauté chasseur costs more, as does also a fried chicken Maryland, a Mallard duck, reedbirds, or any good steak. But, when a writer or a sightseer wants to indicate extravagance, do you ever hear him refer to a "chicken palace" or a "steak palace" or a "duck palace"? You do not! It always reminds me of a line of a good friend of mine and fellow sympathizer: "A tenderloin steak costs twice as much as a lobster, even if it sounds only half as fast."

For those who want figures, I may further defend the morality and economy of the lobster by stating from the menu of any so-called lobster palace that where half a broiled live lobster costs a dollar and a quarter, such comparatively Sunday school foods as rack of hothouse lamb, saddle of hothouse lamb, milk-fed chicken, guinea hen, and spring turkey cost from fifty cents to a dollar and a quarter more in each case.

Two years ago I brought down on my head an avalanche of comment for having been so bold as to declare that people often actually went into a Broadway restaurant because they were hungry and wanted to buy something to eat. This was a statement bordering on anarchy, a supreme lese majesty. Who had ever heard of such a thing? Was I not trying to kill one of Broadway's pet traditions—or, I should say, one of the *country's* pet Broadway traditions? It was awful, terrible, fearful to contemplate! Had I no respect for "glamour"? Was I not merely trying to put a lot of good fiction writers out of business by robbing them of one of their most fruitful topics? Thus the questions poured down upon me. And I was abashed. But, alas! what I had spoken was true.

One of the most popular delusions that we are continually running up against is that a Broadway restaurant, to succeed, must first and foremost look well to its acoustic properties, so that the popping of corks may be heard distinctly. This "popping of corks" is popularly supposed to be one of the headline features of the "lobster palace." Everybody is supposed to be drinking champagne on all occasions, in all circumstances, and all the time. As a matter of fact, if this were true, the owners of the "lobster palaces" would deposit in their respective banks at least a million dollars' profit apiece each year.

Delusion number two is that every second table is occupied by a millionaire and his chorus girl friend, that every third table is occupied by an owner of a long string of record-breaking race-